

Shed Skin

by Caitlin Cusack

*One day [I] finally knew
what [I] had to do, and began,
though the voices around [me]
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and [I] felt the old tug
at [my] ankles.
“Mend my life!” each voice cried.
But [I] didn’t stop.
[I] knew what [I] had to do,*

-An excerpt from “The Journey” by Mary Oliver

If I had a totem it would be the timber rattlesnake. But it wouldn't be the evil serpent of the Bible or the mutant snake, with its mouth wide open, on the cover of the movie “Venomous”. It would be the rattlesnakes I saw the summer I spent in West Virginia—docile, gentle, beautiful creatures. I would stand mesmerized for minutes watching them fold their bodies around a log or slide smoothly through the grass on their way to the river. Yet, despite their beauty, they also demanded respect for the power they possessed in their bite. Likewise, there were many aspects of West Virginia I perceived as threatening, but what I discovered, in the months spent documenting and studying the flora of the Smokehole Canyon, was that the imagination is a powerful thing and the mind can play wild tricks on us; especially when we look for evidence to reinforce stereotypes instead of challenging them.

West Virginia's reputation preceded itself. I rolled into the town of Petersburg expecting moonshine-swilling, barefoot hillbillies and my first trip into town did not disappoint. Inside the workshop of the local locksmith hung several timber rattlesnake trophy skins that he shot in the woods that would be my office for the next five months. Truth be told, for a split second I was slightly relieved that there were several less rattlesnakes that I might step on. I grew up in New England where the only remaining rattlesnakes held out in a handful of dry rocky refuges. My relief however quickly turned to horror, and somewhere in the distance I could have sworn I heard the sound of the dueling banjos from the movie “Deliverance”. I called my mother that night to report that I'm not in “Kansas” anymore; my Kansas being suburban Massachusetts where most people were much too civilized, of course, to shoot at snakes.

My co-worker and I were warned that the acquisition of the Smokehole Canyon property by The Nature Conservancy, our employer, was not well received by many of the locals who referred to TNC as The Nature Conspiracy. Particular neighbors were even outwardly hostile and met staff one day with a loaded shotgun and refused to let them access the property; a situation that seemed strikingly similar to the beginning of the rivalry between the Hatfields and the McCoys, a feud that lasted from 1863-1891 along the West Virginia/Kentucky border. At 24 I had never held a gun, had changed my first flat tire just two years previously, and had navigated through the world under the assumption that help or anything you could possibly need could be found on the other end of a cell phone or could be bought in a store. But here cell phone reception was patchy at best and there was no shopping mall nearby. At first blush it seemed that order was maintained by shotgun-toting vigilantes.

One of my first days on the job, I was hop-scotching across a talus slope when I landed two feet away from a coiled copperhead. I shrieked and leapt back. The snake was equally startled and retreated to the caverns beneath the boulders. I could taste my own mortality in that one moment; it was bitter and oozed from my pores like the smell of a rotting carcass. The next day I invested in a pair of snake gaiters, coverings for my lower legs made of a material that was impregnable to snake fangs. For the rest of the summer I was fondly referred to as Copperhead Cait.

The Smokehole Canyon is aptly named. In the morning, as the fog lifts its sleepy head from a night resting above the Potomac River, it looks like smoke rising. One glorious day stands out. I had spent the morning in a sneezing fit because I was inventorying rare plants surrounded by warm season grasses in full bloom. (There's a reason why I have since chosen to be a forester.) On my way back to the truck I decided to shed my clothes and take a cool dip in my favorite swimming hole. I was alone, vulnerable, and completely at peace. I let the current gently float me downstream and soaked in the warm summer sun. I watched the clouds float lazily by and the resident red-tailed hawk as it circled overhead. I have attempted to recreate that feeling of complete bliss through yoga and meditation, to no avail. There's a naivety and innocence about one's early 20's that is just hard to recreate, I guess.

Most of the summer, Ross, my coworker, and I gave the neighboring property guarded by the shotgun-toting vigilantes a wide berth. Until one day we decided it would save us a couple of hours of walking if we cut through their land. As we wandered up the road we came upon a deserted shack with hypodermic needles littered about. What type of toothless outlaws were using these needles? What state of mind were they in after they injected themselves? And more importantly, did they have a shotgun? We decided not to linger long enough to find out. There was something almost toxic about that place. Methyl amphetamine was at epidemic levels and I was sure we had stumbled upon a meth lab. The sound of the dueling banjos grew louder.

All of this fear and vulnerability came to a head on a bluebird fall afternoon. Ross had left to go back to school and Ashton, one of TNC's botanists, had joined me in the field. I left Ashton after lunch to inventory a part of the property I hadn't been to yet and planned to meet him on the road at 3pm. In order to get my work done and meet him on time, I had to cross the neighbor's property. I don't think I'm what John Denver imagined when he sang "Mountain Mama". Nonetheless, there I was being "taken home" by a country road, but not necessarily to

the place where I belonged. As I wandered down the road I heard the sound of a car engine. Normally this is a sound that wouldn't stop me in my tracks but, this day, the hair on the back of my neck rose and my palms erupted in sweat. I reacted in the only way I could think of—I ran into the woods and dove into a pile of leaves. As the black jeep emerged into view the banjos grew louder.

I lay as still as I could and hoped that they hadn't seen me. Damn it, why did I have to wear my fluorescent green t-shirt today, of all days! As the jeep crawled past me my body relaxed. But then, about 200' up the road, the brake lights went on and the passenger leaned out the window and craned his neck in my direction. So I reacted in the only way I could think of—I jumped up and ran! I ran as if being chased by a grizzly bear; I ran as if a serial killer were on my heels; I ran as if those men in the jeep were hillbillies who wanted to make me squeal like a little piggy. I made it to the main access road and breathlessly called into the walkie-talkie, "Ashton! Ashton! Come in! They saw me!" Five minutes later the white TNC truck came tearing up the road at just about the same time the black jeep crept out of the woods. I was now close enough to read the license plate—Massachusetts. I guess they weren't where they were supposed to be either.

From the beginning I had approached West Virginia with a fascination and a fear of its otherness, but what I discovered was that things don't always live up to their reputation. I recently heard a story on NPR where the woman being interviewed claimed that "the prejudice against hillbillies was the last acceptable prejudice." Another person chimed in that it's easy to romanticize Appalachians as quintessential American pioneers, yet at the same time demonize them as degenerate, backwoods, and violent. "Stereotypes allowed Appalachia to remain a 'sacrifice zone'... we put a wall around it and paint it with stereotypes." All of the people I met that summer were no different than friends I had made in other parts of the world. Yet, they possessed a level of self-sufficiency, that in New England we call Yankee ingenuity, and pride that could only be developed by living in a place like the hills of Appalachia. Or maybe this is more of a statement about rural America, of which I still to a certain degree romanticize. It's hard not to when you live where and with the level of privilege that I live.

*But little by little,
as [I] left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which [I] slowly
recognized as [my] own,
that kept [me] company
as [I] strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing [I] could do—
determined to save
the only life [I] could save.*

If a snake is healthy, it will shed its skin several times within the course of a year. I shed, and leapt out of, my skin several more times that summer and learned a very life-changing lesson: it's important not to paint people with broad brush strokes. How we view the world is filtered by our own experiences and prejudices. Similarly, many people demonize snakes, especially poisonous ones. Yet, in some cultures snakes are revered for their fertility, creative force, and guardianship. Sometimes we have to push past deep-seated prejudices and accept our responsibility as guardians. By the end of my time in West Virginia, I had embraced the persona of Copperhead Cait, keeper of the Smokehole Canyon rattlesnakes.

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